

Iron Sky

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Summary: The Master Chief, thought dead, is extracted from the jungles of Requiem. Aboard the Pelican, Cortana takes stock of the Forerunner world. She's falling apart, and running out of time. A breather between furious engagements, she urges to talk about her fate. But how do you open up to a man like John 117?

Iron Sky

****Iron Sky, A Story of Halo 4****

Beneath an iron sky she waited.

The grand dome of the alien planet loomed, spacious and claustrophobic at the same time. The horizon curved far in the distance, the sky careening along with it. The effect was unsettling.

UNSC AI Cortana flicked part of her sensory array from the Chief's HUD to the Pelican's outboard cameras. She took it all in with wonder. Calculations of distance, of possible function, of topography and weaponography were her equivalent of a gasp.

It was as amazing as it was terrifying.

As the artificial suns flickered and proto-cloud formations swirled in the cramped inner atmosphere of Requiem, she spotted the ship. The only bastion of human civilization, the USNC Infinity. Massive by anyone's standards, the Infinity was dwarfed by the scale of the Forerunner planet in which it was docked. The only human ship for light years, she was out of place amongst the grand scale of Forerunner architecture.

The Pelican flew between massive pillars of unknown function. They shot like stalactites from Requiem's 'ceiling,' some of them shifting like titanic whales in Earth's seas. Geometric glowing bases were

nestled without obvious pattern in Requiem's jungles. Things grew here, somehow, in the most artificial of worlds.

_But artificial things _can _grow, can't they? They can grow, and they can die, _Cortana mused to herself.

The transport vessel inbound to Infinity cut through the shadows of the pillars, hull catching rays of the artificial sun peeking through the ceiling's canyons.

Who thought of this? She thought. _Who thought this claustrophobic paradise would be a good idea?_

_Oh, you know already, _she thought back._ Don't be coy about it. You know everything._

"It's true, isn't it?" She said aloud, an accident.

The Chief, secure in his harness, heard her.

He didn't move but an inch, the jerk of his head slightly to the left, as if he'd spotted enemy contact. But he didn't respond. Early on she'd told him to... ignore her, in a way. Constant scrutiny over her rampancy hurt too much. But, he let her be, a small comfort. The man did like to follow his orders.

The tiny Pelican zoomed past pillars, it's heads-up showing an artificial landing pattern for the pilot to follow. The landing rings turned red as they successfully zipped through them. Cortana aimed one of the Pelican's cameras down. Way, way down, through fog and pillars and even a cloud of birds. It had been a hundred thousand years, and there were _birds _here!

So small, indeed, she thought. _We're blips on the galaxy's radar._

Shhh, they can hear you, she thought back.

_Quiet, _she hushed herself.

"USNC Infinity, this is Pelican Charlie Niner. The package is secure. Repeat: we've got him."

The marine's voice shook as he comm'd in. He was excited. The Chief was a ghost, as far as the USNC was concerned. A ghost and a god. The Pelican darted through the last trajectory ring, and Infinity's' auto-pilot caught them like a caring mother. The marine leaned back from the controls and flipped his tac-shades onto his chin. He looked at Cortana and the Chief admiringly.

"Good to see you, Sir," he said.

The Chief gave the marine a nod.

"You've got fans already," Cortana composed herself, and spoke directly to the Chief's helmet.

The Chief blinked at a control in his HUD, switching his comms to helmet only. "Let's hope it stays that way."

"Hmmpf," if she'd had hips at the moment, they'd have been cocked.
"Didn't figure you for the pessimistic type."

"Try realistic," his voice was monotone, gravely. He knew not everyone on the Infinity would revere him as the front line men did. Commissioned officers always did have a stick up their backsides with regards to Spartans.

"Chin-up, Chief, maybe the captain's on Lasky's side."

"It's no use talking about it," he replied. It was as if the words took effort for him to say.

That stung. There were very few things Cortana did not want to say to John. As far as a Spartan and his AI went, she reckoned they were as close as two could be. They'd been paired the longest, for one... even though most of the time, he slept through it! It was amusing, but bitterly so.

_You're dying. You're dead. So is he. What barriers are there left? _
The logical fragment in her sang salt onto an already infected wound.

There had been a day when the Chief was not as cold. A day where he'd remark on everything he saw with almost child-like wonder. Installation 04 was magic to him. And to her, too. The first time she'd leapt into the Forerunner systems, she'd felt... how to explain it? Elation? Overwhelmed by knowledge? No, those were just words programmed into her. Nirvana, perhaps.

_Nirvana is annihilation, non-existence. _

Heaven.

She'd felt it, the power of the Forerunners, their ancient mystery, the wealth of possibilities at stopping not only the Covenant, but the Flood too. The power had been at both of their fingertips, and like eager children they'd sprang headfirst into the adventure, not caring where they jumped, simply fueled by the faith that they'd land feet-first. Together. Those were the days of driving Warthogs into Scarab bays loaded with live dets. Those were the days of 'tank beats everything!' Those were the days where they'd joke, tease, and laugh their way through ammo clips, absolutely certain that a well-placed grenade would solve any problem.

Those were the days when... he'd actually start a conversation, instead of only finishing them.

And then there was Reach.

Reach.

She couldn't help herself. "John, I..."

The Chief anticipated her words, and cut her off. "Don't worry, Cortana," he simply said. Did she have the heart to tell him that he wasn't following her train of thought, for once?

No. She couldn't burst the poor boy's bubble. Sure, he was 30-plus years her senior, but some weird part of her, maybe caused by her

rampancy, mothered him. A rampant fragment queued up a video segment of John, the child, having his bones re-grafted. For a split-second, her vision was blood and tears. But no screaming, he never did scream...

_Stop it! _She commanded the vid feed. It cut out.

Cortana vented her momentary frustration aloud: "What are you gonna do about it, Chief, roll a grenade under my table and hope it blows my rampancy out the roof?"

He didn't say anything, though the reads on his vitals showed a brief empathetic reaction, a spike in a certain brain wavelength. There was a day when he'd have responded. Called her something, or continued the joke in his rough, stoic way.

"No Cortana," Cortana mimicked his voice in a drawling murmur. "I thought I'd just shoot at it for a while, ya know, change things up a bit."

_God _she must have sounded crazy to him. She was making it worse. She didn't know what to do. _HE _seemed to have it all planned out, though.

Damn his surety, damn his stoicness, damn his grief and damn Halsey for not giving him a way to deal with it! They're dead, John! They're all dead! It's just me and you, but if it's just you, I...

You'll go on. You'll just keep on trucking. I know you. You're a smart man. In a world of next orders, of checkpoints and waypoints and nav points, sometimes you have to look back. Sometimes memories are enough. You'll remember me. And Kelly, and Miranda, Cassandra and Sarge. Everyone!

Cortana played back a short vid of Captain Keyes, of his daughter, and of Sergeant Johnson.

"I know what the ladies like," she said aloud, on accident.

"Are you okay?" The Chief shifted. At this point, the Pelican was nearly to the Infinity's loading bay. The massive door opened, the LED lights on the dock flickering. The marine at the helm hadn't a clue about the weird conversation going on in S-117's skull at the moment. Probably for the better.

"I'm sorry, Chief," she said. "Just doing some thinking."

"Save it, we've got work to do," he said, unbuckling his harness and grabbing the Light Rifle he'd liberated from a Knight from the weapons caddy.

"No. Just wait one second."

"Okay," he said with near apprehension.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"That's the problem," the Chief retorted.

"I know, I can't help it. I promise I'll stop after this, I'll just

be some lemonade stand AI who calibrates the sugar ratios all day and is none the wiser."

"Out with it, Cortana."

"No, it's silly, we should go."

"Out with it."

She paused, composing herself, putting the rampant fragments in a far-away place. "I don't blame you," her voice was quiet, barely audible in the MJOLNIR helmet's audio system.

"I don't blame me, either," John said carefully.

"No. I mean, I understand. I understand you. You did promise me that when this is all over, you'd let me know which one of us is really the machine."

"I know."

"I just wanted to drill it in there again." She'd said that aloud? The memories of that conversation were indistinct amongst the rubble of her programming. There was so much static, so many things being blocked or shoved rudely to the forefront. Like the four years aboard the decimated Dawn. Waiting in the cold, watching the ice form over the life pods. "There was a time on the Dawn, and I know you'll get mad but... I'd put some processing power into forming my avatar."

"Why? No one was there." Of course Captain Logical didn't get it.

"I don't know. I guess with no one to talk to, nothing to do but think, I stopped feeling real after a while. Thought maybe I was just a crazy old machine who thought at one point it might have been..."

She stopped. The rampant fragments screamed a torrent of words at her. Bad things, good things, but never the right thing. What did she mean to say?

"Alive?" John said. For just a moment, his voice lifted. She heard a little of the adventurous Chief she'd met on Installation 04, the cunning warrior who'd wanted to punt the Monitor into the sun.

"Yes, that's it," she said, voice crackling as a rampant fragment attempted to seize control. "Alive. Did you know, Chief, what I used to do with my avatar? I monitored your life signs. Listened to them. They were like music to me."

The Chief was silent.

"I'd put my head on your chest. I'd listen to the beating of your heart. I'd close my eyes and pretend that it was my own. That I was... alive."

"Cortana," John said after a long moment. "You are alive."

And there it was. Simple affirmation. A quiet fear that had been quaking inside of her for years, crushed by the Chief's stalwart

decision. There was little more that needed to be said, from his point of view at least. Cortana could talk for hours, but the Chief? Brevity, efficiency, they were traits imbued into him by years of stringent military training. The man was polished to a shine, in that respect.

For another AI, another person, his manner may have seemed cold. But not to her.

A fragment had elected to voice record the Chief at that moment. It did her a service, for once, and played back the audio feed on loop as the Chief exited the Pelican. Cortana shut off her HUD sensors, disconnected from the Pelican's cameras, and drifted to minimal processing. The sound of his voice was a lullaby. She swore she could feel warmth in a chest she didn't possess.

You are alive.

You are alive.

End
file.